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ABSTRACT

In 1991, in response to a mandate from the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, Cameron University developed a Communication Assessment Program to measure and assess the competency level of students in writing and speaking. The communications assessment sub-committee considered several options for assessing student skills in writing, speaking, and critical thinking. Finally, it decided students should respond to a written prompt. In the spring of 1994, the committee developed a course to meet assessment goals set forth by the university. The support system for the program was strong. Significant effort was made by administrators, faculty, and coordinators of the program to assist and support students in understanding and completing the assignments given in this course. To date, Cameron University has completed three communication assessment programs. Fourteen students participated in the first class. Aside from completing an essay and speech, students were tested on the Comprehensive Assessment and Program Planning (CAPP) Tests for critical thinking and English grammar. At the end of the course, student speeches were videotaped for evaluation. The evaluators determined that on a scale ranging from unsatisfactory to excellent, students gave satisfactory speeches. Responding to feedback about the course, the faculty offered a second assessment course in the fall of 1995. Again evaluators from other departments were trained as evaluators; again, the speeches were videotaped and found to be, on average, satisfactory. A third course was offered but test results are not in yet. The course is still being reviewed to improve it. (TB)

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"Evaluating the Public Speaking Component in General Education Assessment of Communication at Cameron University."

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Communications Assessment at Cameron University

Introduction

In 1991, responding to a mandate from the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education and North Central Association, Cameron University established operational guidelines to assess academic programs throughout the university. In September, the university established an Institutional Assessment Committee to map a program to assess general education courses and all academic programs.

In the Spring of 1992, the Institutional Assessment Committee submitted a list of general education objectives to the faculty and asked them to rank the importance they would assign to each objective. The faculty rated the following three items in order of perceived importance:

a. The ability to write effectively,
b. The ability to think critically, and
c. The ability to speak effectively.

With these objectives as a focus point, the IAC created two sub-committees in the Fall of 1993 to assess these skills. Critical Thinking and Communications Assessment Sub-Committees formed to plan and implement a program to assess writing, thinking and speaking skills of Cameron students.

The purpose of this paper is to describe how Cameron University developed a Communications Assessment Program to measure and assess the competency level of students in writing and speaking. Another committee was assigned assessment of critical thinking.

First, the paper will outline activities that led to the present sequence of communications assessment activities being conducted at Cameron University. Second, focus will be given to the structure of the assessment program developed by the Communications Sub-Committee. Third, develop a summary of three assessment programs that have been conducted at Cameron. Fourth, a summary of strengths and limitations of present assessment efforts will be outlined.

Communications Assessment Activities

Cameron University is a multi-purpose university serving the people of an eleven county area in Southwest Oklahoma. It is one of seven regional universities in the State of Oklahoma. The mission statement of the university gives insight to the relevance of assessment activities:

> The university recognizes that the educational process includes the development of the intellectual, cultural, social, physical, moral, and occupational capacities of persons who participate in its programs and activities. The university desires to assist its students and other persons living in its service area in acquiring the skills, knowledge, values, and attitudes that will enable them to lead creative, productive, and self-fulfilling lives. (1)

In essence, how successful are the programs at Cameron University in meeting the mission statement of the university?

The Communications Assessment Sub-Committee considered several options to assess student skills in writing, speaking, and critical thinking. Finally, it decided students should respond to a written prompt that presented a problem to be solved using the skills of writing, reading, and critical thinking. The prompt read:

> Suppose that you have close professional ties with a person who you have good reason to believe is engaged in conduct which you regard as unethical. Consider the arguments for and the arguments against exposing this person. Develop a position on this issue which could serve as a guide for anyone in such a position. (See UNIV 4211)

The committee felt the prompt would meet three goals in evaluating student competency in the assessed skill areas.

First, the wording of the prompt requires the student to select and defend a position in their interest area. Second, using a persuasive instead of informative prompt challenges the student more, therefore, requires a higher level of speaking, writing, and critical thinking to meet the assignment. Third, while public speaking can be assessed from either an informative or persuasive prompt, the selected prompt allowed for a stronger assessment of critical thinking skills which would motivate and challenge the student to perform at a higher intellectual and skills level.

The assessment of student work (speaking, writing, and critical thinking) was assigned to three faculty groups for

evaluation. The authors were co-chairs of the Communications Assessment Committee that focused specifically on writing and speaking skills.

To assess speeches, the committee selected The Competent Speaker Speech Performance Evaluation Form. This SCA Speech Evaluation Tool was selected for reliability. (2)

To bring structure and accountability to the evaluation process, a course was developed to collect data for assessment purposes. The student's assessment portfolio would contain samples of work and tests to be used for evaluation.

Structure of Communications Assessment Course

In the Spring of 1994, the Communications Sub-Committee developed a course to meet assessment goals set forth by the university. The characteristics of the course are as follows:

1. The course would be a one-hour upper division (4000 level) course that would be offered to student at no charge.

2. To qualify for this course, a student must have completed 45-70 hours at Cameron University. This is the number of hours defined by the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education for mid-level assessment purposes.

3. Students had to have successfully completed English Composition I and II as well as Fundamentals of Speech at Cameron University.

4. The course required 16 clock hours of classroom activities for the one hour credit assigned the course.

5. The student had to complete all assignments in order to receive credit for the course. A grade of satisfactory/unsatisfactory was assigned the course.

6. Specific course meeting times were defined for the course. The first course met for four hours on Monday and Tuesday. Students were required to clock four hours in the university library to do research. On Wednesday, four hours were assigned to the writing of the theme, giving the speech, and completing an assessment of the program during the final hour.

7. The first class met on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday afternoons to avoid conflict with regular classes the participants would be taking. Students were officially excused from any class they missed while taking this course. A letter from the Provost was sent to all faculty encouraging their support and to excuse students from missed classes. The university officially named this period University Assessment Week at Cameron University.

8. Students took CAPP exams in English and critical thinking which were supervised by staff members of the Institutional Research Division of the university.

A Cameron University faculty member volunteered to be the main course facilitator and contributed significantly to the writing of the course syllabus. The facilitator, Dr. Mary Rubin of the Education Department, played a paramount role in coordinating the day-by-day activities of the assessment course both from an administrator and student coordinator position during the testing period.

Faculty members from English and Communications served as advisors to students in preparing essay and speech assignments. Other faculty were available to consult students at the library, the computer labs, and faculty offices with problems and questions the students might have regarding each assignment. This provided each student with an opportunity to consult with numerous faculty members on specific areas of concern or uncertainty regarding the goals and assignments of the program.

Copies of current speech textbook, English textbook, style manual, dictionary, and thesaurus were available to the student for use in the library and in the classroom/ computer labs while preparing the speech and written paper.

Students were allowed to ask questions and seek guidance, but care was given not to direct the student in a particular direction in the evaluation of the prompt or the approach the student could take in preparing the written paper or speech.

The support system for this program is strong. Significant effort is made by administrators, faculty, and coordinators of the program to assist and support the student in understanding and completing the assignments given in this course. Everyone involved in this program became problem solvers for the students by providing a feedback system that enable the student to have the necessary facilities and materials to perform each assignment.

Summary of Communications Assessment

To date, Cameron University has completed three Communications Assessment Programs. The findings of the first two programs have been completed while data for the third program has been collected but the results are not presently available.

First Course

Fourteen students participated in the first class. Aside from completing an essay and speech, students were tested on CAPP Tests in critical thinking and English grammar.

At the end of the course, student speeches were video taped for evaluation.

Three evaluators from three departments throughout the campus were selected to view and evaluate the speaking competency skills of each student. Evaluators for the first assessment program came from the Departments of Mathematics, Human Ecology, and English.

To reach greater objectivity in the evaluation of speeches, care was taken to select evaluators outside the Department of Communications. Because Fundamentals of Speech is a required course for all students, the committee did not wish to select members from this department as evaluators.

Before evaluating the speeches, the evaluators were given a training session that accomplished three objectives. First, the Competent Speaker Evaluation Program was explained to the evaluators from a conceptual perspective (a review of the theory supporting the Competent Speaker Evaluation Program). Second, the proper use of the Competent Speaker Evaluation Form was demonstrated. Third, the faculty evaluators were given samples of speeches to evaluate using the Competent Speaker Evaluation Form. Following each speech, a discussion followed in which each evaluator discussed his/her ranking of the speech as well as the ranking given each of the eight categories on the Competent Speaker Evaluation Form. A variety of speech examples were viewed ranging from poor to excellent. The communications faculty trainer had completed two SCA Workshops on using the Competent Speaker Evaluation Form.

Goals for the training program were: first, to explain the Competent Speaker Evaluation Program; and second, to help the faculty evaluators reach a desired level of confidence and competence in using the Competent Speaker Evaluation Form.

The evaluators were two females and one male full-time faculty members at the university. Each member had volunteered for the program.

The results were collected by a communications faculty member, tabulated, and given to the Testing Division of the university for review and analysis.

The evaluators determined that the students on the average gave satisfactory speeches. Examples of student work ranged from unsatisfactory to excellent as measured by the Competent Speaker Form.

Second Course

Responding to feedback from students and faculty who participated in the first course in the Spring of 1994, the committee decided to repeat the course in the Fall of 1995. One major change was made: the structure of the course would cover a ten day period. Students felt they did not have enough time to research and prepare the assignments in a three day period. The students especially indicated the need for more time to prepare and practice the speech assignment.

The course schedule now included planned activities on Monday, Tuesday and the following Wednesday. The speech would be given first. The students now had additional time to make final changes in the written assignment. With these changes, seven out of twelve students completed the course following initial enrollment. This was disappointing to the committee because they had worked to have a larger sample of students that would be representative of the general student population at the university.

The evaluation procedure remained the same for the second course. Faculty from three academic disciplines volunteered as trainers: human ecology, music, and theatre.

One problem faced by the second assessment course was the omission of the course in the University Course Schedule for the Semester. The committee relied on sending letters to all Cameron University students who met the criteria of 45-70 course hours and had taken English Composition I & II as well as Communication 1113 (Fundamental of Speech). The population group for the second course was approximately 150 students.

Cameron University does not require students to take general education courses within the first two years of study at the university. Therefore, some students postpone taking English I & II and Fundamentals of Speech until either their junior or senior year. It is not unusual to have a number of

seniors in their final semester taking public speaking. This causes a problem in attaining a larger pool of students each time the assessment course is offered.

The evaluators of the video-taped speeches found the student speeches to be satisfactory on an average with samples of speeches ranging from unsatisfactory to excellent.

In order to validate the results of the university evaluators, three members of the Department of Communications, who teach public speaking, also evaluated the speeches. It was found that the evaluators were very similar, while the university evaluators did evaluate the speeches slightly lower than the Communications faculty members.

Third Course

The committee decided to offer the course again in the Fall of 1995. With more time to plan, it was possible to have the course listed in the University Course Schedule which came out in March of 1995. Additionally, all faculty received notification of the course and instructions on how to advise students eligible for the course. When an eligible student enrolled for the Fall Semester of 1995, a message appeared on the enrollment screen to alert the advisor of the student's eligibility.

A cap of 30 students was placed on the course. Again, changes were made in the schedule to reflect student and faculty feedback. The class schedule now had student participating in on-campus activities on Tuesday, Wednesday and the following Monday. This still gave students adequate time to prepare assignments yet shorten the procedure for the faculty members involved.

Following committee discussion about changing the prompt from a persuasive to informative format, the members decided that the persuasive prompt required students to perform at a higher cognitive and skill level.

The third assessment course was held on September 19, 20, and 25. Though thirty students initially enrolled for UNIV 4211, only 12 students completed the program. One problem that caused a drop in enrollment was some students were charged for the course when they should have been enrolled for free. A final group dropped the class after activities on the first day.

Again, the evaluation procedure discussed above was followed. The results for the third group is presently being tabulated.

Conclusion

The experiences listed above pinpoint many of the challenges and successes associated with general assessment of public speaking, critical thinking, and writing skills at the university.

The Communications Assessment Committee will continue to resolve problems associated with this course.

First, continued effort will be made to attain a larger sample of students for each course. There were more than 30 students interested in taking the course, but due to administrative problems in enrollment, the final enrollment number was less than half the thirty students enrolled.

Second, additional encouragement and support will be given students to complete the course assignments. The requirements of the course do take time; are challenging; and require additional work on the part of already busy students.

Third, the committee will review the prompt for effectiveness and workability.

Fourth, the committee will review the feedback from students before making final decisions on the next course.

Fifth, the university will continue to seek ways to attain a larger representative sample from which to draw conclusions.

Though the course has not been the success desired by the committee, there are certainly a number of strong points to the program.

First, this course does meet a number of North Central requirements regarding skill assessment.

Second, the faculty participation and input into the Assessment Committee is excellent. There is an open and dynamic dialogue between faculty members from all disciplines represented.

Third, the administration has given unconditional support of this program. Administrators and staff in Education Outreach as well as the Provost of the University have been quite helpful.

Fourth, there are multiple measures for public speaking, writing, and critical thinking skills.

Fifth, faculty from various disciplines across campus participate in the success of the course.

Sixth, the course, its administration, and evaluation activities are accomplished through faculty volunteers who support the assessment process at the university.

In conclusion, the Communications Assessment Sub-Committee has structured an excellent format to assess writing, speaking, and critical thinking skills.

Each assessment course adds new and valid insight into the process. The three assessment courses completed have given English and Communications faculty data useful in improving English Composition I & II and Fundamentals of Speech.

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2. David D. Morley, Sheryn P. Morrale, and Ruth Hulbert-Johnson, (November, 1991). "The Component Speaker": Development, reliability, and validity of a communication-competency based speech evaluation form." A Paper Presented to the Annual Convention of the Speech Communication Association, Atlanta, Georgia.